My experience as the faculty senate chair at the University of Mississippi during a year of budget crises is likely typical of many other university senate leaders. I found that major challenges face senates trying to play a role in developing budget-reduction recommendations. These include (1) an absence of understanding on the part of faculty of the intricacies of university operating budgets; (2) unreasonably short response times mandated by state leaders for budget-reduction implementation; (3) the apathy of some faculty senators about the issue and their role in addressing it; and (4) an inability of the senate, because of its structure and processes, to respond quickly to urgent matters of this nature. Despite these obstacles, I believe faculty senates can be an influential voice in administrative budget decisions.

The faculty senate of the University of Mississippi is the representative voice of nearly seven hundred faculty members and consists of fifty-four elected senators from forty-three departments housed across one college and seven schools, but it has historically played a limited role in major areas of university governance, including budgetary decisions. This past year, UM implemented two midyear budget cuts of 2 and 3 percent, respectively, to the state allocation for the 2008–09 fiscal year. The challenges posed by these cuts were compounded when state universities were told to plan for an additional 5 percent legislative budget reduction for the 2009–10 fiscal year. At no point did the administration consult with the faculty senate on these matters.

Nevertheless, during this tumultuous period, the UM faculty senate worked to become active in the decision-making process for reducing the budget. The experience of the past year teaches lessons that could make the senate more effective in the future.

**Budget Cuts**

Upon learning of the first budget cut, as chair, I charged the senate’s finance committee with recommending a set of budget-reduction measures for consideration by the full senate. However, the implementation of the cuts was announced by the provost’s office before the finance committee could schedule its first meeting. Given that the first round of reductions was “absorbed centrally” and did not affect any academic programs, one could argue that it was unnecessary for the senate to be asked to weigh in.

When the second round of budget cuts was announced, the university was not in session and few faculty members were on campus. Once we were able to consider this second budget reduction, senators expressed either “analysis paralysis” or apathy. That is, some faculty members were unwilling to make a decision on a set of recommendations without a full analysis of the university budget, while others disengaged themselves from the process at the committee level. These latter few may have been unable to commit the extra time to this important issue because of their current teaching and research activities. Fortunately, the administration spared academic programs again by absorbing the additional cuts centrally.

Discretion over how to implement the final round of announced budget reductions was given to the deans. Some members of the senate felt that their deans were in the best position to consider different funding scenarios, while others believed a “statement of values” from the senate might guide administrative decision-making processes in these difficult fiscal times. A small group of finance committee members began to work up such a document, but most of the deans had already submitted their 2009–10 budgets and announced their plans to the departments. In the College of Liberal Arts, cuts included eliminating travel funding, not filling several open tenure-track faculty lines, and not renewing a number of full- and part-time instructor positions. These strategies tended to align with the recommendations emerging from the finance committee, but such recommendations never reached the floor of the senate for full discussion. It seems likely that any additional budget reductions in the future will require much harder decisions that will painfully affect the central academic and research missions of this university.

**Lessons**

I have come away with a number of valuable lessons from these experiences. First, a great deal of budgetary information was gathered from the chief financial officer both in individual meetings and through invited presentations to the full senate. Such information is essential for framing possible budget-reduction options for eventual consideration by a senate. I believe that early in each senate term the university’s president, provost, and chief financial officer should be invited to discuss the state of the university, including budget issues. I found many senators unaware of how little support comes from the state and of the relatively large percentage of expenditures on faculty and staff salaries and fringe benefits. So while state-mandated budget cuts reflect a fraction of the overall operating budget at many institutions, there is little room for making cuts in other areas before faculty and staff lines are affected.

Second, I believe that in order for a senate to be most effective in situations that are advisory in nature and require quick response, the senate chair must take steps to identify members with strong leadership characteristics who are willing to work outside the structure of senate processes to flesh out draft recommendations and for these recommendations to be considered in emergency meetings either of the full senate or of the senate executive committee. During these processes, the senate chair must develop effective avenues of communication with administrators to keep them apprised of the deliberations and be able to deliver such recommendations in an expedited manner.

Third, I believe that every faculty senate should develop a set of guiding principles or a statement of values that can be acted upon quickly by administrative units in times of fiscal crisis. Such a document could also serve as a university’s long-range strategic plan when times are prosperous and additional revenues are anticipated. Typically, strategic planning councils are charged with aligning the university’s mission with unit-level strategic plans and presenting such plans for final consideration and action by the administration. Developing such a document
would highlight the core of what faculty value and give faculty a basis for influencing future budgetary decisions in both good times and bad. Without such a document, faculty must simply trust that, when the next fiscal crisis affects the university, administrators will make decisions based on the same values held by the faculty.

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